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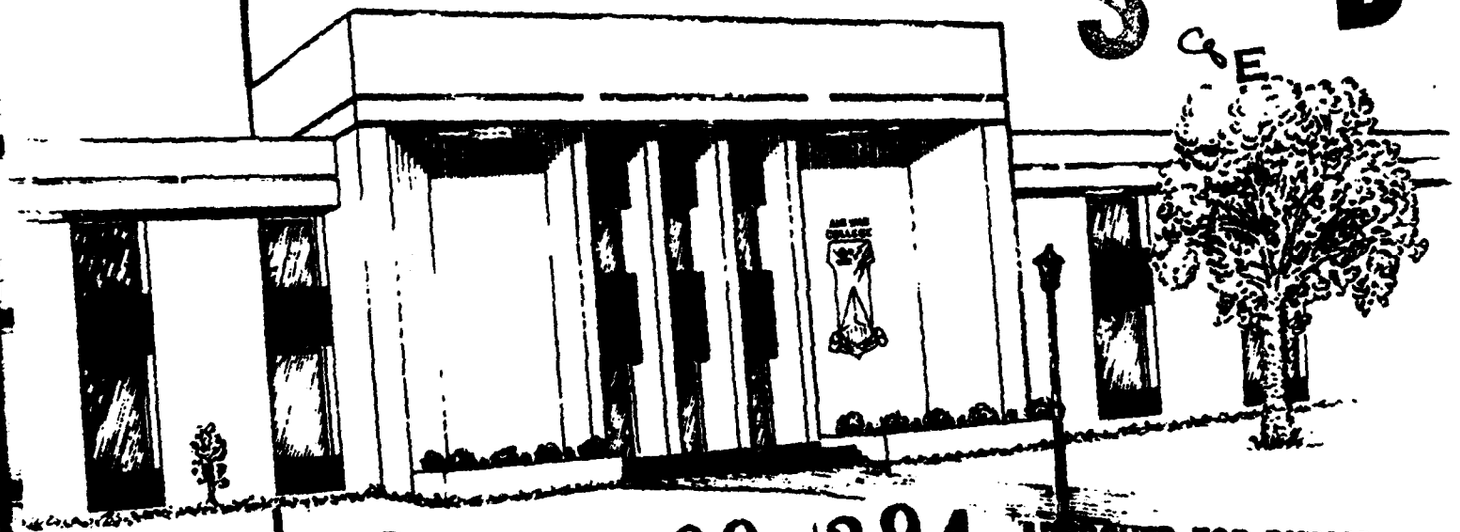
PROACTIVE AIR FORCE PUBLIC AFFAIRS: THE NEED, ENTITLEMENT AND EFFECT

By LIEUTENANT COLONEL ALAN E. DeFEND



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PROACTIVE AIR FORCE PUBLIC AFFAIRS: THE NEED, ENTITLEMENT AND EFFECT

by

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A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE RESEARCH

REQUIREMENT

Research Advisor: Lieutenant Colonel James S. O'Rourke, IV

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AIR WAR COLLEGE RESEARCH REPORT ABSTRACT

TITLE: Proactive Air Force Public Affairs: the Need, Entitlement and Effect

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~~Commentary~~ on Air Force public affairs and suggestions about the state of its "proactivity"--which is defined as an orientation that generally promotes seeking and planning activity, rather than reacting to it. Discussions about the nature of public opinion and media opinion and the effect of them on the public affairs process are included, as is a precis of formal bars to proactivity in the sense that civilian public relations practitioners might define it. Specific suggestions are given for making public affairs more proactive while staying within legal, organizational and ethical guidelines. Epilogue suggests that the Air Force's image is determined as much or more by the way it performs (in day to day preparation for employment of force and in actual employment of force) than by its public affairs practitioners.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Alan E. DeFend has served as an Air Force public affairs officer for more than 18 years. In addition to working in and managing public affairs offices at various levels in the United States and overseas, he served as the Chief of Advertising and Publicity for an Air Force Recruiting Service detachment and as the commander of an American Forces Radio and Television Service organization with stations in Turkey and Greece. He holds a Bachelor of Journalism in broadcast management from the University of Missouri at Columbia and a Master of Arts in management from St. Louis' Webster University. He has been awarded a variety of Air Force medals and decorations including successive presentations of the Meritorious Service Medal. A graduate of various professional military schools, he completed the Air War College in 1988.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The challenges faced by the United States Air Force since its inauguration as a separate military service in 1947 have been monumental. Some seem particularly related to airpower; some are common to other U.S. military forces. Some are unique to the military; others are common to both governmental and private organizations. Many stem, in one way or another, from the manner in which the Air Force relates to and interacts with the publics it serves and which support it.

As the Air Force enters its fifth decade as a separate service, international relations have become more complicated and technological challenges abound. Precision in dealing with its publics under the aegis of public affairs has become more critical and has consequences that relate directly to how well the Air Force does--and is perceived to do--the job for which it is chartered.

This paper will deal with the general subject of Air Force public affairs initiative in the 1980s, whether it is doing what it is chartered to do, impediments to its activities and how it may improve its effectiveness. It will begin with a look at the Air Force's public affairs inheritance, make general statements about what public affairs ought to be doing for the Air Force, examine how Air Force public affairs and civilian public relations are

related and review formal and informal restrictions on public affairs people and their products.

"Proactivity" is a word that will be used frequently. Because of its only recent acceptance to the American lexicon in the sense it will be used here, an "official" definition is in order. To the author, and as used in this paper, proactive means a general forward-thinking and acting stance --a readiness and willingness for action--an orientation that seeks and plans activity and "acts" rather than "reacts" as its primary bearing. The 1986 supplement to Webster's Third New International Dictionary provides the world's first formal acknowledgment of this character of the word (as its second meaning): "acting in anticipation of future problems or needs." The first definition, and that given in other references, concerns "interference between previous learning . . .and later learning" and will not be used in this paper. (1:157)

Proactivity has been emphasized frequently in recent years. Upper-level public affairs management has encouraged practitioners at all levels to "spread the word" and "get out front" and take the initiative. These charges are at least partly in response to direction from Air Force leaders who frequently react to media-borne information they consider unfavorable, inappropriate, false or misleading. Actions taken as a result of such direction do not fall into the "purest" definition of proactivity to the extent they are undertaken in response to a negative communicative stimulus.

Put another way, the author hopes to document the Air Force's philosophical and legal right to be more of an advocate for its activities, rather than just an apologist for them.

Since the orientation of this paper is on the process of providing the public outside the military with information about what goes on inside it, the focus will be on public information (described as "media relations" and by other names) and community relations. This should in no way be seen as evidence that the responsibility of the Air Force to keep its own people informed is any less important or that initiative is not necessary in this area. In fact, we shall see a key role ascribed to military and civilian employees of the Air Force in the current statement of the objectives of the Air Force public affairs program.

Sources documenting this work will range from classic communications references to current thinking in and out of the military and government, along with the author's thoughts based on more than 18 years as an Air Force public affairs practitioner.

Last, many of the concepts listed will be evaluated in the context of public opinion, what reflects it and how it can and should be affected by Air Force public affairs actions.

CHAPTER II

THE HERITAGE OF AIR FORCE PUBLIC AFFAIRS

It has long been acknowledged and will soon be sanctioned by regulation that public affairs is a command responsibility. (2:2) Therefore, it is appropriate (and convenient) that the first public affairs act of the air arm of the U.S. military was undertaken by the commander of that activity when Captain Charles DeForest Chandler, the officer in charge of the Aeronautical Division within the Office of the Army Chief Signal Office, wrote the first news release in 1907 announcing the creation of the Division. (3:6) This, apparently, was to be the extent of the air arm's formal public affairs activities until WW I when "information" people were charged with various responsibilities including intelligence, historical documentation and public affairs.

Various iterations of staffing and nomenclature ensued until 1935 when there was but one officer and one civilian in public relations. They had to release information through the Public Relations Branch of the Military Intelligence Division of the War Department's General Staff. Intelligence officers customarily had public relations duties at base level. (4:165-70) "They assumed an attitude of 'say nothing and be safe,' rather than recognize the need for informing the public." (4:170-1) It seems reasonable to assert that, in some quarters, this is among the traditions of its forebears which the Air Force retains

to the present. This notwithstanding, some of the best known Air Force leaders once served in public affairs positions, among them General H. H. Arnold (chief of the Information Division in 1925) and General Ira C. Eaker (acting chief of the Information Division from 1937-1940). (3:6) Shortly after the official birth of the U.S. Air Force, the function was placed at a "special staff level." (5:1) In 1954, it was given the same basic character it now retains, focusing primarily on media and community relations and internal information. (6:1) Later, it was charged with the adjunct responsibilities of security and policy review (of material proposed for public release) and concomitant obligations to plan its activities and provide resources for them.

The purpose of public affairs or information is usually described in preambles to regulations and guidelines governing the activity. Regardless of how many ways there may be to say it, the constant reference is to provide information to the public. (George Washington may actually have been the first public affairs officer when he reported to Congress about the activities of the military.) (7:2) The current Air Force regulation governing public affairs says "from the earliest days of military flight, there has been an important responsibility to inform the public--a goal that remains foremost to this day." (3:6) In 1969, the Air Force said "keeping the American public informed of Air Force activities" was a primary aim of the information program. (8:1) The Department of Defense, in its first promulgation

of its Public Information Principles in 1970 said it was important to provide timely, accurate information to the public. (9:5)

In a refinement that takes into consideration the effect of providing information to the public, the objective of Air Force public affairs was stated in 1973 to "increase the degree of understanding and knowledge the American people possess concerning Air Force missions and requirements." (9:1)

The current policy expands the charter:

> Essential Role of Understanding. The Air Force Public Affairs Program was established to increase the public's understanding and knowledge of the Air Force mission and needs. Recognition of public interests and attitudes is essential because the role of aerospace power in our national defense eventually must be resolved by the citizens of the United States. Also this public understanding cannot be achieved without a similar understanding within the Air Force. Each person in the Air Force, both military and civilian, therefore, must be familiar with the Air Force mission and roles and become a source of reliable information. (3:6)

It is as a result of this charge that we begin to see that the public affairs program can best aid in the accomplishment of the missions of the Air Force--the raisons d'etre for its existence--by being more than just a pipeline or mechanism for dispensing information in response to demands from the public.

That the military ought to have an apparatus serving as a conduit for information from the military to the public is seldom disputed, even by vehement critics of the function. Exactly the character of that apparatus and its precise

activities, however, is the subject of much interpretation and opinion.

The fact that some care should be exercised in the management of communication was apparently first acknowledged 15 years ago when the Air Force first indicated that planning should be a part of public affairs. The now defunct AFR 190-41 noted in 1973 that planning involves "analyzing all factors which affect the information function at all levels, identifying trends and evaluating causes of action that will assure maximum utilization of information resources." (10:2)

The plain English translation of all this is that the aim of Air Force public affairs is very similar to the public affairs or public relations organization in any other large and complex organization: to secure good will and public support. Without profit, a profit-making entity cannot operate. Without expressed public support, no governmental branch can operate.

Public affairs exists not for itself but only for the objectives of the organization of which it is a part. "Public Affairs is not, itself, an Air Force mission, and its practice in the Air Force is appropriate only to the extent it supports Air Force missions and the public's right to know about them." (2:1)

In a commentary concerning the impact of military thinking on public opinion, Lieutenant Colonel C. E. Raisor built bridges between the communist threat (which, in 1960, he saw as the imperative for a large defense establishment)

and the effectiveness of military communication. He noted that if there is no defense establishment, the threat cannot be countered; without public support, there can be no defense establishment; without communication of the threat, there will be no public support and without careful planning and evaluation, there will be no assurance of effective communication. (11:6-8, 64-6) Sounds simplistic, rudimentary, timeless and self-evident (not even the primary threat has changed much in 28 years); but in this concatenation lies the essence of why it is important to carefully structure communicative efforts and have in mind a specific goal before doing anything. If it is, then, that simple, why does everyone simply not do it? In the next chapter, the impediments to an adoption of a more focused public affairs program will be examined.

CHAPTER III

OBSTACLES TO EXCELLENCE IN AIR FORCE PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Thus far, we have seen how public affairs developed from the beginning of America's involvement with airplanes and imagined how a perfect model of communication might function to the benefit of the nation and its newest service. Obviously, things do not work perfectly in the day-to-day life of the Air Force or anything else. In this chapter, we look at some of the reasons why the world of public affairs is not a perfect one. Considered will be comparisons with civilian public relations, the difficulty of defining the public opinion we say we want to impact, formal bars to governmental (and, consequently, Air Force) communication, relevant aspects of the military-media interface and criticism of the public affairs function. A brief look will also be taken at problems most managers in the Air Force would say they have (time, people, money and tradition or inertia) and the unique impact of them on public affairs.

A Comparison of Public Affairs and Public Relations

The basic practice of public affairs owes its origins to public relations which can trace its heritage (perhaps stretching the point a bit) for a long time, indeed. The earliest recorded distribution of a "how to" pamphlet occurred with an Iraqi farm bulletin issued in 1800 B.C. It told farmers how to plant and watch out for vermin. The American beginnings are traceable to the American Revolution

and the political struggles that ensued. (12:23) Through it all, runs the thread of taking actions to cause people to think well of what you are doing in order to achieve the objective of perpetuating your operation, whether it must show a profit or retain the support of those who ultimately benefit from it and provide the wherewithal for its continued existence. The indication of support is either business traffic, in the case of a profit making entity, or favorable public opinion in the case of the public sector.

Is not public affairs just the Air Force version of civilian public relations? In the broadest sense that is true, as there are far more similarities than there are differences. Version is the key word, and therein is implied the fact there are important differences. Cutlip, Center and Broom, in the sixth edition of the "bible" of students of public relations, say: "The basic objective of most programs is either to change or neutralize hostile opinions, to crystallize unformed or latent opinions, or to conserve favorable opinions by reinforcing them." (12:152) No arguments there from most public affairs people and commanders. Critics, as we shall see, take issue with those objectives, however.

Public relations practitioners have at their disposal an array of potential programs limited principally by creativity and budgets. If acclamation is desired and the objective is to communicate a particular business message, public relations programs can be melded with paid advertising

to achieve an objective. With the exception of recruiting and bid advertising, targeting markets with paid ads is a luxury the government does not enjoy.

Both public affairs and public relations people have the problem of convincing management that what they do contributes to "mission accomplishment." For example, how much faster a new $5,000 machine allows products to be produced can be documented. How many more airplanes can be refueled in a given time with a new nozzle of similar value is discernable. However, relating the value of a tenth of that amount spent to entertain civic leaders or potential customers involves only generalizations that do not speak as loudly as profits or takeoffs when it comes time to eliminate something.

The way the public views public affairs and public relations affects the latitude they have to operate. Splashy, expensive store grand-openings are tolerated and even expected by the public, whereas the same hoopla associated with a government activity would be considered "inappropriate." Marshall E. Dimock says: "Citizens are traditionally suspicious of any effort by a public body to advertise itself. They seem to have entirely different standards for business and government." (13:5)

Where the line exists between communication and propaganda frequently depends on who drew it and whose definition is being used. Public relations and public affairs practitioners draw it in different places.

Propaganda will be examined briefly later in this chapter.

Other differences between public relations and public affairs involve regulatory and legal guidelines on surveys, mailing privileges, stated objectives and use of monies. Restrictions such as these will also be dealt with later.

Defining Public Opinion

Thirty years ago, Air Force Colonel Reade Tilley commented on "Public Opinion and National Survival" saying: "Public opinion can build or destroy virtually any organization, program, or plan within the public domain. It is the most powerful force in this country." (14:71) If one grants the correctness of these statements, some questions logically follow: what, then, is public opinion? How can it be measured? How is it expressed? What is the evidence of it? What is the mass media's relationship to it?

These issues are some of the most vexing for public affairs people at the Washington level. Outside the seat of government, the questions become easier to answer. In a town of 25 people, to find out what public opinion is on an issue, all one needs to do is ask what each person thinks. There may not be a consensus, but some conclusions could be drawn. An organization's public opinion on a larger scale can be gauged by the tenor of public interactions with the organization. Unfortunately, military organizations do not have the volume or the same quality of interactions as, for instance, a hardware store whose proprietor can tell by the comments, disposition and number of his customers whether

they are satisfied with his operation. What are other measures? Some conclusions can be drawn from letters of complaint or praise received. If organizations have "hot lines" that citizens can call and express their discontent, the volume of calls can be a guideline.

A less reliable but frequently used indication of public opinion is information appearing in the media. Publications and broadcasts are often used to answer public opinion questions. As with many social science questions, the real answers may be both unattainable and somewhat short of the extremes. Therefore, "media opinion" and "public opinion" are neither the same nor unrelated. The problem arises in determining how much the judgments of editors expressed as media opinion reflect the opinions of the public, and convincing those who believe the relationship is very strong that it may be otherwise.

Communication theorists have largely come to the conclusion that the mass media do not have the impact on public opinion and attitude formation that they were originally thought to exert. John D. Robinson, writing on the effects of mass communication, says "abundant evidence suggests that the mass media tend to reinforce and accentuate existing conditions rather than promote egalitarianism or abrupt change." (15:358) Although they are not terribly helpful or particularly persuasive, Robinson's conclusions regarding attitude formation indicate: "The process by which citizens acquire their political attitudes and opinions is

enormously complex, involving a continuous interplay among institutional sources of information and persuasion, interpersonal contacts and ideological and personality factors." (16:51) It may be concluded from these thoughts that what appears in the media should not automatically be considered to have a great impact on public opinion--especially outside the area in which it appears.

Some current thought on the role of the media gives credibility to its agenda-setting function. It has also been asserted that the more interest that exists with regard to a given subject, the more likely is the media to be able to "stimulate and intensify interest." (17:133) Another important consideration to keep in mind is whose interest is being stimulated. Hartmann and Wendzel, although addressing primarily the foreign policy formulation context, nevertheless make salient points regarding media impact on public opinion. They talk of the general public and, within it, the "attentive public" amounting to no more than a quarter of the total who are well-informed and "constitute the primary nongovernmental audience for foreign policy discussions" and "opinion elites" who are given no percentage but are the "articulate, concerned 'core' who give some kind of structure to policy-making discussions and provide the means of access to those in authority." (17:132)

Gabriel A. Almond has also written extensively on the subject of what composes the "public" and his divisions are similar to Hartmann's and Wendzel's. (M-9:11) It should

also be acknowledged at this point that the relationship between the media, opinion elites and policymakers may be purer in the area of foreign policy formulation since many have concluded the majority of Americans simply have no interest in the subject. (17:129)

Since there are probably more "opinion elites" in the Washington D.C. area than in any other part of the country, and since they are theoretically more attuned than others to information appearing in the media, the connection between broadcast or printed information and governmental decisions that are usually thought to be made based on public opinion is probably closer there than elsewhere. This does not mean that Washington-area media opinion and public opinion are, therefore, particularly representative of overall U.S. public opinion. It means, because of the concentration of policymakers (and population) in the Northeast corridor, and because of the intense responsiveness of the media serving it, that this area is different from the rest of the country. Conclusions, therefore, regarding what "people" in this area are thinking on a given issue are not necessarily transferable to the remainder of the country (and may not even be accurately represented by media reports of issues). Consequently, it is difficult to convince military leaders that the media opinion and public opinion situation in Washington is unrelated to or reflective of the situation in the rest of the country. The best one could hope for is to make the case that it is different, complicated and requires

a different mindset to understand. Perhaps the best recent advice on this subject came from the retiring congressional librarian, Dr. Daniel Boorstin, who noted during a broadcast interview that "it is dangerous to keep listening to the judgements of those whose job it is to make judgements." (18)

The general subject of surveys and polls will be dealt with in a subsequent chapter. Some discussion of their relation to public opinion is appropriate now, however. The respected scholar, V. O. Key, said, "the government gains most of its information about public opinion from members of the elite and has no reliable way of surveying the mass public on most issues." (19:169) Certainly it is true that the government does not do much polling for reasons that will become clear. However, many private organizations conduct polls that can be helpful to those in government seeking general indications of attitudes.

The Air Force has long recognized the value of surveys as indicators of attitudes and opinions of its people. Almost 30 years ago, the Air Force held an "Attitude and Opinion Research Seminar" in New York. One of the most notable voices in the field, Elmo Roper, succinctly explained the reason for public opinion research. He said "It makes the common man articulate." (20:10) It expresses the feelings on a variety of issues of people who otherwise would be unable to make their views known to decision makers. In voting, the common man can only express a preference for the

general views of one candidate over another. The professionals at this conference used their experience in the civilian world to illustrate the value and efficacy of polling to measure public opinion. The Air Force was mostly interested in polling Air Force people as a method of targeting communication strategies. But the principles remain valid, regardless of the audience. The Air Force has made good use of opinion research with regard to internal information and base newspapers and most major Air Force organizations require public affairs offices to periodically poll readers to make sure their needs are being met. This same kind of polling would be extremely valuable in targeting communication strategies for public information, media relations and community relations, but is subject to restrictions that will be outlined later. Making use of the research of others, or using creative communication processes to accomplish the same goals may be alternatives.

In sum, then, regarding public opinion, regardless of how desirable it might be to inoculate everyone in the decision-making chain--in and out of public affairs--with the same understanding of the function of public opinion, how it is expressed and the relationship of media opinion to it, that is obviously not possible. If this study or portions thereof can be used as further evidence that it is not as simple (or as worrisome) as it might appear to conclude from exposure to selected major market media that "public opinion" on a given subject is as good or as bad as it might appear on

the surface, then it will have been of some value.

The Interface of the Military and the Media

Encyclopedic discussions have already been devoted to this topic and it is probably not useful to do and more than capsulize some of the current thought on the subject as it relates to initiative and proactivity in public affairs.

It is probably true, but only reluctantly admitted, that the objective of some senior government managers and military officers is to see that only platitudinous praise is printed or broadcast about their operations. The only thing hated more than screwups is publicity about screwups. Nothing particularly unnatural is implied in these statements. (Military commentator, Fred Reed, however, thinks there are officers who are "neurotically thin-skinned" who do not appreciate that democracy dictates occasional criticism of people and organizations.) (21) The point is made simply to illustrate the impetus for the animosity many senior people feel toward the media and those who most frequently associate with it and may be perceived to represent it or its values--public affairs people.

It is likely the military and the media will always have a shotgun marriage. Betty Kathleen Ford said the military-media relationship is based on the "familiarity breeds tolerance premise" and commented on the relationship between the media and the military public affairs community:

> The longer press corps members have covered the military, the less responsive, credible and skilled they think military public affairs representatives are. . .the

> longer military public affairs representatives have been in public affairs, the poorer they rate the press corps on skills, traits, and functions. (22)

Many military people blame the media for America's Vietnam experience. A fairly recent study of the opinions of senior people about the military-media interface noted: "Since the war the attitude of suspicion and distrust of the media has been further set in the minds of the military." (23:3) This study concluded: "The camps are divided and the battle lines have been drawn for a long siege. Therefore, it is necessary to re-draw a line more close to the middle." (23:28) In an addendum, the authors note: "Our study confirmed the existence of a serious negative attitude toward the media in contemporary military officers." (23:29) Other authors have come to similar conclusions with respect to both military commanders and public affairs people. (24; 22; 25)

The best recent treatment of this subject (with an emphasis on wartime relations) is Battle Lines: A Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Military and the Media. In reviewing it, Peter Braestrup points out the basic differences in values of the military versus the media to the extent that two cultures are involved. "The military ideals center on the words 'duty honor and country.'" (26:15) Rules and standards are valued. Conversely, in wartime, they are up against a group "that is individualistic, competitive, word conscious, impatient, lacking internal 'rules' or 'standards,' varied in its needs, suspicious of authority . . ." (27:141)

Much recent discussion of these differences followed the U.S.'s military intervention in Grenada, to which the media were not initially invited. The intense media complaints which followed prompted the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to create the Military-Media Relations Panel in 1983. As a result of its recommendations, an armistice of sorts was created. It involves a "pool" arrangement whereby a small number of reporters will represent the various print and broadcast media segments. It is not perfect. But it permits the military to plan for the media in a conflict and provides comfort through censorship for those who believe information useful to the enemy may be released. And it assures the media that their basic needs will be met in future conflicts. The best expression of the situation seen to date that applies, both in and out of conflicts, was provided by retired Army Major General Winant Sidle, the chairman of the panel that informally bears his name.

> . . .the optimum solution to ensure proper media coverage of military operations will be to have the military--represented by competent, professional public affairs personnel and commanders who understand media problems--working with the media--represented by competent, professional reporters and editors who understand military problems--in a nonantagonistic atmosphere. The panel urges both institutions to adopt this philosophy and make it work. (28:32)

Most public affairs practitioners enter the military with backgrounds in journalism or other fourth estate-related disciplines. Consequently, they have an appreciation for the role of the media, an understanding of its function and an appreciation for the least painful ways to deal with

inevitable bad news. Unfortunately, least painful is still painful. Public affairs people, in managing the dichotomy of relating to media and military, usually a) quit or are fired; b) move their tents entirely onto the friendly side of the battle lines, or c) adopt a shifty posture that raises fence-sitting to an art form. Probably most enduring public affairs people lie somewhere between b and c. Although understandable, this orientation obviously does not foster proactivity. It fosters an attitude of resentment and most frequently has public affairs people looking for ways to avoid dealing with the media instead of figuring how to impress commanders with their utility because the former attitude is a "safer" one.

Formal Restrictions On Action

In Chapter II, the connection between public affairs and public relations was made. The discussion concluded that there are no great differences in the objectives of the two. But the intimation arose that the Air Force, like the rest of the military (and, to a lesser extent, the government as a whole), must deal with various formal restrictions that keep it from functioning with the freedom of public relations practitioners. It is to those restrictions that we now turn.

In looking for some repository of restrictions, we are confronted with much the same situation as the salvors of the Titanic. We get the impression that, at some time past, all the rules were packaged nicely but fell upon hard times and are now strewn throughout the government much as the

contents of the ship on the ocean floor. In addition, if they are hard to find, agreement on what they mean and how they are to be applied is even harder to find. Nevertheless, new Air Force public affairs doctrine says "congressionally-imposed restrictions on governmental public affairs activities have been variously interpreted and compliance throughout government has been inconsistent; Air Force public affairs programs must conform to both their letter and their spirit." (2:9)

Much as new sommeliers are given the keys to the cellar in the course of their training, new public affairs people learn they are to avoid getting too close to anything resembling "public relations" because there are laws against it. This is in spite of the fact that public affairs inherited the title of "public relations" from the Army in 1947 and retained it until at least early 1957. (29; 30)

"The law" to which everyone most frequently refers is the Gillett Amendment to a supplemental appropriations law passed in 1913. It reads: "No money appropriated by this or any other act shall be used for the compensation of any publicity expert unless specifically appropriated for that purpose." The Representative from Massachusetts was concerned over a civil service circular advising of tests to be given to potential applicants for the job of publicity expert for the Department of Agriculture's Office of Public Roads. The specifications called for someone who would prepare news matter and secure the publication of same by

virtue of experience in the field and affiliations with newspaper publishers and writers. Gillett believed it improper for any department of the government hire someone "simply as a press agent to advertise the work and doings of the department." He added: "In the ordinary work of the department, anything which requires the knowledge of the public certainly finds its way into the press at this time . . ." Much discussion ensued before the amendment passed. A call for an explanation from the Agriculture Department fell on unsympathetic ears as did the news that the examination in question had, in fact, been withdrawn by the Civil Service Commission. Representative Asbury F. Lever of South Carolina questioned Mr. Gillett on his intention asking: "The gentlemen does not undertake in this amendment to prevent some one employed in the Department of Agriculture, for instance, giving to the country information as to the work of the department?" Mr. Gillett replied: "Of course not. Of course, they are doing it all the time and have been. All the departments are doing it." The House apparently placed more value on calls for a guarantee "which will prevent the use of public moneys for any such purpose unless Congress specifically and deliberately authorizes such employments." References to previous restrictions on the Forestry Service and the War Department's distribution of information presenting its side of a pending issue did not help opponents of the amendment. Neither did the revelation that government employees were collecting clippings and

giving interviews for the purpose of "advertising the chiefs of bureaus and heads of departments." Nevertheless, we can conclude that legitimate information dissemination requirements of the government were to be allowed, while "exploiting and advertising" were not. (31)

If the distinction between legitimate information dissemination responsibilities and public relations or press agentry or propagandizing was clear on Saturday, September 6, 1913, that may have been the last time. Where to draw the line constitutes the crux of the question of proactivity.

David H. Brown, then special assistant to the Public Printer, dismissed the amendment in a 1981 article saying government public affairs had become its own worst enemy by believing the Gillett Amendment (which he quotes incorrectly) prohibited the use of publicity. He said, "it merely states that such funds must be clearly identified." (32:4) Would that it were so simple. Such language has been almost as common as page numbers on other appropriations bills in the more than seven and one-half decades since the original legislation. Even so, Brown urges public affairs people to come "out of the closet" and refute the amendment and stop making it a "Sword of Damocles." (32:4) A more perceptive criticism of the law comes from Cutlip, Center and Broom: "Congress would do far better to recognize the facts and make intelligent and integrated provision for the proper function of publicizing government activity than to incessantly try to bottle up government publicists." (12:574)

There are other laws that restrict public affairs.

The so-called "gag law" of 1919 reads:

> No part of the money appropriated by any enactment of Congress shall, in the absence of express authorization by Congress, be used directly or indirectly to pay for any personal service, advertisement, telegram, telephone, letter, printed or written matter, or other device, intended or designed to influence in any manner a Member of Congress to favor or oppose, by vote or otherwise, any legislation or appropriation by Congress, whether before or after the introduction of any bill or resolution proposing such legislation or appropriation; but this shall not prevent officers or employees of the United States or of its departments or agencies from communicating to Members of Congress on the request of any Member or to Congress, through the proper official channels, requests for legislation or appropriations which they deem necessary for the efficient conduct of the public business. (33:353)

Other laws with similar intent and wording were passed in 1972 and 1973. (12:574)

Regardless how convenient it would be to simply overlook the intent of Congress in this area or wish the situation were otherwise, we are forced to deal with it as it is. That should not, however, restrict public affairs practitioners from the obligation to explain to the public what it is the Air Force is doing and what, in its professional opinion, the most judicious use of defense funds is to accomplish the mission given to it by the Congress and the American people.

Determining, in day-to-day business, where the line is drawn with respect to these laws is difficult and open to dispute. Is the Air Force issue of a news release about the benefits of a proposed new airplane (before production has been approved by Congress) a violation of the rules?

Probably not. Is the Air Force printing an expensive brochure about the same airplane and distributing it to people arriving for an open house a violation? Probably. The question is: who determines on which side of the line a proposed action falls. The answer should be: reasonable people who are cognizant of the guidelines making informed decisions. Should this prevent public affairs people from taking the initiative to tell the story of the capabilities of their units and what is needed to improve them? Emphatically not.

The Counsel to the President has specified guidelines for the Executive Branch to avoid violating the rules. Fred F. Fielding said: "Unfortunately, the line separating proper and improper conduct is imprecise and the propriety of an activity may well depend on each individual situation." (34:1-2)

The most often cited violations of anti-lobbying laws occur not within the Department of Defense, but the fallout affects the entire government information apparatus. Most recently, the State Department was accused of operating a "prohibited propaganda campaign" with respect to Nicaraguan Contra publicity. (35; 36) The Department of Energy was accused by the General Accounting Office of "orchestrating extensive lobbying by a private firm and nuclear weapons scientists against a possible congressional ban on nuclear tests." (37)

The restrictions involving printing material and

mailing it without a request are somewhat less ambiguous. In the past twenty years, Printing and Binding regulations have not impeded the conduct of Air Force public affairs. It is the use of the frank that constricts the effectiveness of public affairs programs and efforts to efficiently plan them.

The United States Code restrictions on the subject of mailing material without a request date to at least 1939 when Congress perceived abuses of the penalty mail provision were possible under New Deal programs. Consequently the following restrictions resulted:

> Except as otherwise provided in this section, an officer, executive or independent establishment of the Government of the United States may not mail, as penalty mail, any article or document unless--(1) a request therefor has been received by the department or establishment;" (39 U.S.C. 3204). (38:2)

Regardless of how desirable it may be to randomly poll the public to determine attitudes and levels of understanding so that public affairs programs may be targeted to accomplish specific objectives, it cannot be done by Air Force people using Air Force resources. The primary restriction concerns use of the frank. Depending on the scope of the program and the relationship of the subject matter to pending legislation, restrictions on publicity and lobbying activities might also be involved.

Other polling restrictions concern the questions themselves. A Department of Defense directive requires Office of Management and Budget approval for surveys of more than 10 people. (39:9)

Comment on the proscriptions involving the use of community relations appropriated and non-appropriated funds are also in order here. Whereas public relations firms may certainly decide whom they plan to entertain (with specific influential goals in mind), Air Force people are restricted by requirements that mandate ratios of military-civilians who may attend. (40:1) Other specific guidelines deal with the organizations to which potential "entertainees" belong. Since these rules are many and different and since they all were created in an attempt to avoid criticism under one or more of the aforementioned laws and rules, they will not be examined in detail.

Criticism of Public Affairs Activities

The most consistent and significant criticism of the public affairs function has come from the media and certain members of the legislative branch. Mostly, critics claim the government is either doing something wrong or spending too much money doing what is in its charter.

Frequently, the military is accused of propagandizing. There are as many definitions of propaganda as there are dictionaries or opinions on the subject. The situation is not likely to be resolved.

The term had an apparently honorable beginning in the middle of the current millennium when it was used in connection with the Catholic Church's propagation of the faith. (12:544; 41:942)

Perhaps part of the negative connotation surrounding

it can be traced to either the sexual aspects of the primary definition of its root word, or the activities of the Nazis earlier this century. Ernst Kris and Nathan Leites say propaganda is, "attempts to influence attitudes of large numbers of people on controversial issues of relevance to a group." (42:267) After examining dozens of meanings, William C. Mateer settled on L. John Martin's definition: "a systematic attempt through mass communication to influence the thinking and thereby the behavior of people in the interest of some in-group." (emphasis in the secondary source). (43:10) If one compares these descriptions with the legislative restrictions outlined above, it is easy to see why Air Force public affairs activities need to be scrupulously clear of opportunities for criticism. Indeed, the Department of Defense's "Principles of Public Information" specifically obligate the Department to "provide timely, accurate information. . ." and indicate that "Propaganda has no place in Department of Defense public information programs." (9:6) This is primarily because of the strong negative connotation of the word.

One person's or department's community relations or communicative effort is another's propaganda, however. "Any attempt to influence public opinion can be considered propaganda of one sort or another," says Robert Cirino in his vituperation about the manipulation of public opinion. (44:180)

One can imagine what is to follow the title of former

Senator J. W. Fulbright's 1970 diatribe, The Pentagon's Propaganda Machine. Early in his effort, he says the word propaganda "in current usage implies some degree of subterfuge." (32:9) He was speaking of a 1969 campaign he says was designed to sell the American people and the Congress on the need for an anti-ballistic missile system but the remainder of his book is aimed at proving the Department of Defense has overstepped its bounds. Throughout his book, the senator rails about the excesses of the Department of Defense and its "mind shaping machine" while defense officials deny wrongdoing or impropriety. (32:9, 29, 39, 107)

CBS' "Selling of the Pentagon" followed shortly after Senator Fulbright's book. The tenor of the program was much the same as the book. The network hoped viewers would conclude the Pentagon was spending too much money promoting itself and violating restrictions on its activities to boot. Examples were abundant, as were corollary comments. No less a revered commentator than James J. Kilpatrick called "VIP trips. . .impressive exercises in old fashioned brain-washing." (44:21) Even the crassest observer of military public affairs activities would have to concede that the military certainly had the right, to periodically take groups of key citizens to observe its activities and during those trips, one might expect the schedule to be structured with some goal in mind--undoubtedly to show a combination of capabilities and requirements of a given segment of the military. It would seem evident that there is nothing

outside of legal or proprietary guidelines under which the military operates to prevent such tailoring.

The military probably missed an opportunity to refute many of the admittedly incorrect aspects of the program by not being prepared or willing to counter it. The program was broadcast twice but: "No one from the government had requested broadcast time to reply to 'Selling,' so CBS itself organized the 'Perspectives' program on which participants argued pro and con on the issues." (45:205) In spite of problems with the program, it won a Peabody Award for "electronic journalism at its finest." (46:51)

The implications of these criticisms for purposes of this discussion are legion. They can be reduced, however, to contributing to the mindset that there is something shadowy or improper in public affairs activities that needs to be guarded lest it be discovered. Proactivity this does not promote.

Once one has been accused, correctly or otherwise, of impropriety in one's activities, two reactions are possible. Either the offensive activity will be stopped, or it will be repeated with the knowledge that the criticism is tolerable and part of the price of doing business. The challenge is to know the difference, stay within the law and make sure the obloquy does not override the benefits in terms of one's whole program.

Other Impediments

Thus far, the discussion has centered on public affairs-particular problems. Since they are germane to the conclusions to be drawn, it is important to consider some facts of military organizational life that impact on how public affairs people approach their jobs.

Few public affairs managers are comfortable with the rationale that leads to the manning of their offices. Certainly there is some formula but it never seems to take into consideration the uniqueness of the situation. For example, it is common to find the same number of people devoted to public information in geographic areas that have widely differing media climates. Public affairs people have, in recent years, either been unwilling or unable to do anything about this situation, always subject to "their share" of reductions but never seeming to qualify for additional people. In comparison with civilian companies with similar responsibilities, Air Force public affairs manning pales. Not having enough people to manage all responsibilities contributes to the syndrome of being so busy responding to inputs from others that there is no time for development of a long-range initiative-based effort. As acknowledged at the outset, public affairs is certainly not the only career field to believe it does not have enough people to do its job.

Budgets specifically earmarked for public affairs activities would make public relations professionals chuckle.

Beyond office supplies and, perhaps, a few dollars in "representation funds" that have to be shared with congressional fruit baskets and greens fees for foreign dignitaries, there is no money for public affairs activities. However, lest one get the incorrect impression, it is only fair to acknowledge that activities directed by higher-level organizations (trips for civic leaders, visits by traveling displays, the Thunderbirds, etc.) are paid by others, although certainly the costs are chargeable wholly or partly to public affairs.

Tradition is an important yet elusive commodity in public affairs. Tradition can lock offices into conceptual compartments. Without enlightened leadership in Air Force organizations, public affairs people may find themselves doing things that are others' jobs and unrelated to public affairs. This detracts from the ability of offices to be proactive and show initiative they may be waiting to express. For example, many offices became responsible for base "hot lines" when they came into vogue in the early 1970s. That public affairs people are interested in the kinds of comments and complaints that people express directly to the boss almost goes without saying. Some bosses think it also should go without saying that public affairs people should be responsible for the mechanical transcription of such calls and the administrative burden of seeing that the proper office answers them. Base marquees that announce the arrival of distinguished visitors and other events are not

automatically the province of public affairs but, frequently, the responsibility for making sure they are updated and taking the "heat" if they are not, is.

The only solution for an office that believes it is burdened with somebody else's responsibilities is an explanation to the commander of the role of public affairs as public affairs sees it. If the commander still sees it differently, he can certainly apply the axiom illustrated at the outset of this paper--that public affairs is a command responsibility--and use his office in any way he sees fit. The only way a public affairs officer can change such a situation is to prove that he can be of greater service to the commander and the command by doing things differently--always a difficult, and sometimes an impossible task.

CHAPTER IV

TOWARD MORE EFFECTIVE AIR FORCE PUBLIC AFFAIRS

At the beginning of this work, the author said his general subject was proactivity and an examination of how Air Force public affairs could improve its effectiveness by developing such a mindset and fostering conditions that promote an attitude of control and leadership rather than reaction. In some respects, the situation may be reduced to the difference between efficiency and effectiveness. Most public affairs people are *efficient* at what they do. When called upon to respond to media inquiries or communicate information about mishaps, their efficiency is generally unexcelled in the military or corporate communities. But believing that one's world is only composed of forces majeure does not an <u>effective</u> program make. What, then, are some concrete steps that can be taken to mold a different mindset?

Most public affairs people attend introductory and follow-on courses at the Defense Information School. A logical first step would be for the school to give great emphasis to the general subject of proactivity and what does and does not limit it.

Some of the most sacred cows of public affairs are gradually changing. For example, the "Doctrine for Air Force Public Affairs" that has previously been referenced, urges public affairs programs to be "message oriented" rather than "channel oriented." (2:8) In other words, internal

information, public information and community relations may not be the end-all for public affairs as people were taught for many years. Structuring plans to emphasize the what rather than the how means believing what we say is more important than the vehicle used for organizing the message. This may seem like a minor point. It is not. It is a radical change in the modus vivendi of public affairs--almost an alternative lifestyle. It is an experiment that stands a chance of positively affecting the effectiveness of all of Air Force public affairs programs.

Professional public affairs people constitute only a portion of the effectiveness equation. Since senior commanders ultimately call the shots, it seems only logical that some attention be given to public affairs at the Air Force's professional military education schools--both the residence and individualized programs. Future senior leaders of the Air Force attend these fora and if they do not hear it there (with reinforcement from their public affairs people) they are not going to hear it anywhere. Efforts are now underway at most professional schools but there are exceptions. For example, as this paper is written, there is no public affairs block of any kind at the Air Force's junior course--Squadron Officer School. This situation should be remedied soon. A focused, pervasive program is needed at Air University (which manages most Air Force education). This suggestion is made with complete cognizance that public affairs is but one of dozens of specialties in the Air Force

whose leaders think their messages should be ingrained early in developing officers.

It has already been noted that opinion polling is one of the most effective ways of ascertaining public opinion--finding out what people think about specific issues. It has also already been noted that the Air Force, along with the rest of the government, cannot conduct traditional polls on its own or hire pollsters for the purpose. Consequently, the Air Force has been generally restricted to secondary research--using those applicable parts of someone else's research for its purposes. There is nothing wrong with this. It just frequently does not allow the creation of a communication program with a precise basis and it seldom allows for the kind of follow-up necessary to tell if what you have done has been effective.

If it is impossible to conduct the purest kind of research, there may be ways to approach the ideal.

Air Force students in civilian universities can conduct surveys as part of their projects under the cloak of academia. Several such studies have been done in the past. In 1965, Edward A. Mezapple polled 250 households as part of the work toward his Masters in Business Administration at New York University. He found 23 percent of respondents did not think military people paid taxes and that half did not think Air Force officers needed degrees. He concluded the present information program was not effective in informing people of the mission of the Air force and the education and training

needed for its people. (47:50-1) Worthwhile? In 1965, specific messages could have been targeted to the public in response to identified knowledge gaps. Now, in combination with other research, this effort might provide a roadmap for a future academic or communicative effort.

In his 1958 Boston University master's thesis, Frank Milton relied on two programs to investigate "attitudes of adult civilians toward the military service as a career" and a "study of the Air Force as seen by parents and sons." In the first case, the research was conducted by Dr. George Gallup's Opinion Surveys Inc., sponsored by the Office of Armed Forces Information and Education. The latter study, in a unique alternative to governmental polling, was done by Social Research Inc. for Ruthrauff and Ryan Advertising which then (1955) had the Air Force's recruiting advertising contract. (48) Probably any modern attempt to secure similar information would have to be heavily oriented toward information Air Force Recruiting Service could use in attracting applicants. Although that is a legitimate communicative objective in its own right, some questions could undoubtedly also be structured to be of value to other Air Force informational needs.

"Focus groups" were used by the White House as a key element in "selling the outcome (of the Reagan-Gorbachev summit) to the American people." (49) An in-depth discussion with about a dozen well-educated people resulted in some plain language concerns and some revelations in

understanding that the President's staff could use to target speeches and give general and specific direction to communicative efforts. Delta Airlines is taking small groups of its best customers to lunch throughout the country to find out how it can better serve them. A careful review of the laws and literature reveals no apparent reason why the Air Force could not use a similar technique--perhaps under the sponsorship of its offices in the major metropolitan areas of the country. There is also no reason why public affairs people at every level could not make similar efforts.

Air Force people frequently address civilian audiences. The "speakers" program is a bulwark of community relations. Almost always, questions-and-answers are part of such events. It seems possible to reverse the question-and-answer period for a few minutes and allow the speaker to ask the audience, either to comment on or through a show of hands, their understanding of some basic Air Force issues about which senior people only have a vague feeling of public awareness. For example, it seems reasonable (following a speech in which the subject of the strategic triad is introduced) to ask the audience by a show of hands how many believe the B-1B's problems make the airplane unable to do its job. If this question were asked by enough people over a six-month period of time to "non-choir" audiences, perhaps some conclusions could be drawn about public understanding and opinion concerning the issue. Those conclusions could be compared with media reporting and other information and used

to structure communicative efforts or take other actions.

A corollary (and perhaps more viable) alternative to this would see speakers equipped with a stack of surveys that they would ask the audience to pick up on their way out. These would be accompanied by "penalty" envelopes provided for return of the surveys. This method comes as close, perhaps as the Air Force can to conducting its own surveys yet still remains totally within the law. Genuine resistance on the part of an audience is hard to imagine, since no money or commercialization would be involved and anonymity would be preserved with no coding of the responses beyond the event at which they were distributed. Were the fact the Air Force was doing this to be publicized, there seems to be little or no opportunity for criticism as an untoward or exceptionally expensive program.

The Air Force annually sponsors the Air War College National Security Forum which some 80 to 100 civilian leaders attend. Presently, no attempt is made to survey them for attitudes on defense issues during the Forum or afterward. These people would seem to form a prime audience for such polling. With their agreement, these groups could amount to a continuing statistical base. Admittedly, they may be thought to be pro-defense in their orientation (although nominators are encouraged to find people with a wide range of views) and this fact might color the results, but not make them useless.

A similar effort may be possible with the Department

of Defense's Joint Civilian Orientation Conference which annually involves some 60 civilians of the same or higher caliber than the Air War College effort. Too, the Defense Orientation Conference Association, made up of alumni of the JCOC who stay updated on defense issues and have the opportunity to meet periodically, could form a continually expanding pool of survey respondents.

Civic leader tours sponsored by the various Air force major organizations might form another growing body which might be willing to express its opinions in response to questionnaires.

In the case of any of these groups, all that would seem to be needed would be an initial expression of willingness to participate. Future surveys would not, then, be sent to anyone who had not expressed a desire to receive them and the program would not run afoul of the law. A card could go with each mailing the return of which would remove the respondent from future mailings. An annual certification would, likewise, pose few problems.

In sum, we need to realize that there are real blocks to proactivity. Those involving legislation, however, are few and have been reviewed in this paper. Others involving tradition and criticism and similar impediments are harder to grasp. Unfortunately, the conclusion in many cases is still good judgment combined with educated risk-taking and some nerve. Only when we are ready to acknowledge that there is nothing immoral, ungovernmental or unmilitary about targeting

information to accomplish specific communication objectives and that being an advocate for what one believes is the best way to provide for the defense of America, will we be able to make the fullest contribution to accomplishment of the Air Force and the public affairs mission.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

In the final analysis, it should and will be the American people who decide what role the U. S. Air Force and, indeed, the U. S. military, will play in the history of the United States. The ending of the conflict in Vietnam is a clear indication that this is true. This can only be true if the electorate has a great deal of information at its disposal. The free passage of this information is the result of an effective, initiative-based proactive public affairs program.

Consequently, public affairs is not a moribund art. Now, more perhaps than at any time since the Air Force became a separate service, it must demonstrate how <u>its</u> mission contributes to <u>the</u> mission. It needs to demonstrate that it can fill the gap between where it <u>is</u> on the continuum of proactivity and where it <u>can be</u> legally, ethically, morally, organizationally and situationally. If this work has prompted the kind of thought that went into it on the part of others in Air Force public affairs, then it will have been worthwhile.

CHAPTER VI

EPILOGUE

An unstated assumption threads throughout this work. It is the belief in one of the basic tenets of public relations: good performance followed by communication of that performance. Without the former, all the effort directed toward the latter is for naught. That advertising cannot make a success of a bad product is a too-little emphasized truism. A senior public affairs officer illustrated the principle colorfully when he said "You can't make chicken salad out of chicken s--t; there isn't enough mayonnaise."

Over and over, in the texts and commentaries about public affairs and public relations, this principle is recounted and illustrated. Verne Burnett said it succinctly in 1949:

> The keystone of public relations is the character and conduct of a person or organization. . .Some executives use . . .public relations in an effort to gloss over mistakes, or to erect a pleasing facade with insufficient regard for what lies behind it. Give thought to the anticipation of reactions of the general or special public. (50:6)

William J. Greener, former Air Force public affairs officer and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, listed among "Greener's Rules for Government Public Affairs People": "You can't sell bad dog food with good public affairs; your public affairs message will not ever be any better or worse than the product you represent, your institution or

department." (51:22) General Motors, faced with dwindling sales and criticism of its products and corporate policies, staged a $20 million extravaganza in January 1988 to enhance its image. Critical questions about the effectiveness of the program brought this response from Joel Portugal, a New York corporate-identity consultant: "'Images come from performance. . .If this company hasn't changed and they have an event like this, it's as disaster. If they cannot back it up, they've lost total credibility.'" (52)

The message here is that the U. S. military and the Air Force have committed some major mistakes or mismanaged or appeared to mismanage several costly programs in the past few years. Public affairs can and has applied time-honed techniques to make the best of bad situations. Ultimately, however, communications programs will be effective only to the extent they are an accurate reflection of the programs they mirror. If the Air Force expects to not be criticized for excesses or apparent excesses in spare parts procurement or B-1B avionics systems that do not work or appear not to work, it must at least realize the reasons for public opinion or media opinion it does not like and not place the blame for it in the wrong place.

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